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STANDARDS IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

CHARLES H. JUDD

School of Education, University of Chicago

One American institution which English and German visitors cannot understand is our free high school, open to all comers. Nor can they sympathize with our management of these schools. The German looks over the course of study, attends some of our classes, and goes home to tell his colleagues that our students have a good time but do not do thorough work. The few English educators who have cared to inspect our high schools see in them little to distinguish higher schools from elementary schools; they go home to Eaton and Winchester and even to the new municipal high schools wondering how we expect to develop our governing class.

Criticism of American high schools is heard also from anxious observers on this side of the Atlantic. We have been doubling our attendance and our equipment in recent years; we now have more than a million and a quarter students in our public high schools. Have we been maintaining standards? When a boy fails in mathematics, what do we do with him? Everyone knows the answer: we shunt him into history or science and keep him in school for the supposed good of his mind and soul. He loses little, if any, of his self-respect or of his athletic privileges; indeed, in the real world in which he moves failure in mathematics may operate to elevate him to a position of enviable superiority. We have

invented devices which free the student from the necessity of taking examinations. We have elaborated an elective scheme of studies which makes it possible for each to suit his tastes and secure admission to cultivated circles by the most agreeable path.

What is true of our high schools is true of our colleges. The time was when a college education was the high and distinctive privilege of the boy preparing to enter one of the professions. Our Bureau of Education tells us that now 20 per cent of the graduates of thirty-seven leading colleges enter business¹—evidence enough that the old-fashioned exclusiveness of the college as the home of the professional class has given way to a new cosmopolitan idea. With the passing of the old college, the pessimists tell us, we have lost our intellectual standards. As in the democratic high school, so in the college, we have snap courses and excesses of social life; we have evasion of examinations and weak administrative officers who will not send students away when they fail in their courses. We grant endless exemptions and permit irregularities which reduce our courses of study to a pretense and our college discipline to a farce.

The simple remedy for all these difficulties is to set up rigid standards and eliminate those who cannot meet requirements. The writer remembers hearing the advice of a cynical trustee who saw the evils to which reference has been made. "Follow the wholesome example of West Point," he said. "They eliminate 60 per cent of their matriculants." The spirit of the remark is clear and will commend itself to many a despairing teacher who sees his academic standards giving way under the competition of the elective system and the stress of administrative pressure to keep students in college and high school.

The straightforward method of erecting rigid standards and of eliminating those who fall short is so obvious a cure for our difficulties that one is forced to the conclusion that everybody has seen this possibility and rejected it as an un-American solution of our problem. We are indeed able to set up standards, we could eliminate students, we know how to conduct examinations, but we refuse to do all these. Why?

¹ *Bulletin No. 19, 1912.* Whole No. 491, p. 78.

The account which will some day be written of the new American attitude on the elimination of students will, I believe, constitute one of the most interesting chapters in the history of education. We have adopted the position that we will not use our schools as the social agency which terminates the careers of some boys and girls while it puts a few in the positions of leadership. We are in process of creating a new type of society, one in which the selection of the men and women who lead is made in the trades and professions themselves. The ancient system of academic selection, which still survives in Europe, seems to have failed in many of its forms, and a new social order has arisen in which the processes of selection are new in type. The new scheme of selection is only half conscious of itself, and there is in many quarters alarm because the old safeguards have disappeared and the new order does not seem as safe and effective in its production of leaders.

Perhaps the simplest way to bring out the real character of the American movement is to contrast with our practices those of Germany and England.

The first day a German boy goes to school he is made to recognize the fact that he is securing through this school his place in the social order. If he goes to a common school or *Volksschule* he knows he is part of the common people whose duty it is to carry patiently the heavy, coarse burdens of life and to build the empire from below. In some quarters, as for example in the cities of Saxony, he is classified further, by his father's ability to pay for his education, into a mere commoner or a commoner of higher rank. If he is in the latter class, that is, if he goes to a *Burgerschule*, he gets the same course of study but he pays more. His later privileges in life are like those of his poorer neighbor but he has had the advantages of a degree of exclusiveness and this exclusiveness he knows about and doubtless enjoys.

The boy who goes to the secondary school or *Gymnasium* is the future citizen who is made most fully aware of the importance of the school as a social selective agency. The *Gymnasium* is the home of those who are to have privileges when they enter the army. The *Gymnasium* is the road to civil-service positions. The *Gymnasium* is the only path which one may follow to enter

the professions. The *Gymnasium* has no smack of the plebeian about it, for its fees and its discipline are high. The exclusiveness of the *Gymnasium* is not fully defined even in these terms, for while it is a matter of pride to the boy that he may enter the *Gymnasium*, it is also a matter of anxiety, since there are those in charge of this institution who know well the value of a certificate of completion of its course. Every director and every teacher in a *Gymnasium* knows that every boy is eager to secure the social advantages that come to the successful student, and the slightest failure to meet the exacting demands of this school is promptly pointed out as a mark of unfitness to enter upon the higher privileges of society. The American observer who visits the classes of the *Gymnasium* is impressed by the solicitude shown by the boys. A word of reproof from the teacher brings the flush to the boy's cheek or even the tears to the boy's eyes, because everybody knows and feels keenly that the privileges of society are in the hands of that teacher to give or to withhold.

The spirit of all this is perhaps best illustrated by a remark that the writer heard an eminent German educator make after hearing an account of the growth of our American high schools. "A million and a quarter high-school students," he said, "would constitute in Germany the gravest kind of a social menace."

In contrast with this German stratification of the school population, and in contrast with the systematic and strenuous elimination of all who are not worthy to be elevated to the highest positions, our American schools seem very loose and careless. How many American boys take their seats with tears in their eyes because the teacher expresses doubts as to their preparation in geometry? The American boy does not feel that there is much at stake. He knows that the high school is made for him and not he for the one supreme task of holding with a desperate grasp to the high-school privilege as the passport to all the opportunities of official and social life. Is it any wonder that the Germans who visit our schools note a difference in the concentration of our students? Is it surprising that we are impressed in Germany with the instruction and organization of the higher schools?

One finds in Germany that among the intelligent members of society who do not enjoy social advantages, as for example among

the teachers of the common schools, there is an earnest demand for the removal of barriers. No teacher in the higher schools is an advocate for this reform. The common-school teachers are eager to hear about America; they go so far as to talk about the far-off day when there shall be a path from the common school of Germany upward: but that sounds today like an idle myth. Is not the present system making Germany great among the nations? There is need of hewers of wood and drawers of water, there is need of a few leaders who know their places. Indeed, be it admitted, there can be little doubt that the system now in operation achieves in a most impressive degree its purposes. We in America import too many of those thoroughly drilled and highly efficient products of the upper schools of Germany to be in any doubt as to the perfection of that system of selection. Why not adopt the system? Again the answer comes out of the life of our people. The system is not American and we could not follow it even if we came to the clear intellectual conviction that it is theoretically the best system. Half consciously we feel that some day in the future it will be proved that the system of Germany is wrong. Out of the lower levels of society must come the material for later leadership. What if it takes two or three, or even five, generations to evolve by the slow process of natural selection those who shall bring new ideas and new vigor into our social organism? May it not be true in society as in nature that a forced selection comes to its own end by degeneration of the stock, while a slow natural selection makes a vigorous stock which in the long run outlasts the highly selected aristocracy? What if our schools seem inferior today, if we can show tomorrow a generation of a higher type?

This criticism of the German system is not theoretical. Their own vigorous thinkers are calling attention to the need of a reform of the lower schools. The American observer who fails to visit the *Volksschule* and comes back advocating a wholesale adoption of the German plan of education has missed one of its most characteristic elements. The German *Volksschule* is literally an instrument of social suppression. It destroys initiative and limits the horizon of its pupils. It is the home of dogmatic conservatism. If there are two institutions in the world which we do not want in this country they are the German army and the German *Volksschule*.

England stands somewhere between Germany and America in the use of her schools as selective agencies. If a boy goes to Eaton he is very conscious of his destiny as a leader of men. He may have to go home again and play a minor rôle through life, but if so, he will do it with becoming dignity. The boy who enters one of the council schools in Leeds or Sheffield or Liverpool is likely to understand that he is not yet, at least, on the road to high official position. The school is, however, not the determining institution. Soon the boy in Eaton and the boy in the council school become aware of the true instrument of English social selection. It is the qualifying examination. The American in England is impressed most profoundly by the body of respectable educators who make what must amount to a substantial part of their livings by examining the rest of the world. His majesty's inspectors examine people. There are corporations at Oxford and Cambridge which are prepared to examine anyone at any stage of intellectual development. There are examining universities and colleges of preceptors. There are several examinations which let one into schools and more which let one out. One may take these apparently at his leisure if he has time and a patrimony, or he must take them in haste if he is poor and ambitious. Above all stand the professional and civil-service examinations, which lift one into the commanding positions in society and state.

Now and then a voice is raised in protest. Dr. Osler¹ made an attack last October on the examination system, declaring it to be Chinese and the bane of medical education. Now and then some official will tell you confidentially—most official information in England seems to be confidential—that many of the examinations are absurdly inefficient. But in the main the system is accepted as natural or inevitable or at least better than anything else. The American who remarks that at home he has learned to be skeptical about the possibility of judging people through examinations is promptly suppressed by the remark that Americans do not know how to conduct examinations, and that some Englishman who has seen our western high schools has reported that they exhibit a deplorable lack of form, due probably to the absence of a succession of Oxford locals.

¹ *Lancet*, October 11, 1913, p. 1047.

These English examinations are very real facts in the lives of English students. The boy who can pass well an examination has open to him on very advantageous terms the next higher school opportunity. There is a bewildering array of scholarships in England. No secondary school is free; that is, everyone who goes must pay a fee or have a fee paid for him. But to the individual who passes a good examination many schools are free because his fee is paid by a scholarship. Secondary schools have greatly increased in number and enrolment since 1902, when the present type of school organization was adopted, and yet there is no thought in England of opening the doors of these schools as we do in America to all who wish to enter. The formula is, "pass an examination." If you do this you may come, often free; often with an added stipend to pay for your books, your board, and even some of the luxuries of life.

The American student of education finds this system most artificial. It may be proper, so far from the scene of action, to report that the Oxford local examinations, which are taken more than any others, are frankly described everywhere except in the offices of the Corporation at Oxford as so easy that everyone is critical of them. If one looks into individual cases he can find teacher after teacher pointing out the fact which we have long known in America that the fluent, aggressive student often passes a better examination, while the slow and bashful student knows more. The criticism is the more fundamental when it is noted that the boy who is most aggressive and fluent at twelve is not always the boy who turns out best at sixteen.

The writer heard the English system expounded by one of the civil-service board not long since. To the mind of that official the system is most satisfactory. Back in the family life of England, as he put it, the brainy child is selected and the whole family sets about the task of training him for the examinations. While the common members of the family play and resign themselves to lives of obscurity, the picked representative labors and sacrifices and foregoes all the petty pleasures of innocent dissipation. By and by this selected boy gets a scholarship. His work doubles and his mind grows. He gets another. Now he goes to Winchester and lives with a picked group of kindred souls selected from all England.

He needs no stimulus but the hope of new scholarships. He keeps his masters busy finding him tasks and examining his well-nigh perfect productions. The reality of his duty as a superior citizen is so vivid to such a boy in such a place that one naturally pauses to ask what there is like it in America. The answer sounds on the whole rather discouraging: There is nothing like it.

Since we have nothing of the kind, we are naturally led to ask as our next question: Shall we try to imitate the English system? The first consideration which suggests a negative answer to this question is the fact that the English system of examinations does not seem to operate with the precision and effectiveness exhibited by the German method. If we are going to set up in our schools a selective system let us have the best we can find. The teacher in the *Gymnasium*, who controls at every moment the progress of his class, has a much more vital influence over his students than does the English teacher, whose work is from time to time interrupted by an outside examination. So true is this that many English teachers frankly confess that they find in the German schools examples which they recognize as superior in technique of instruction and in degree of intellectual discipline.

The comparison of England with Germany is, however, relatively unproductive as contrasted with the immediate observation that the English system does not provide for the student who does not get the scholarship. The poor boy who goes only to the lower school and then enters upon the humbler calling to which he has access is very likely to take the opportunity of coming to America, on the ground that here his children will have a fair opportunity.

This brings us back to the fact which discourages the pessimist. Our schools open their doors to all. Our schools are free. Our schools make a great effort to keep all the students in attendance. Our schools turn out on the same date the highly intellectual and those who barely pass. Our schools do not try to pick out the leaders but aim to give everybody some training.

If one defends with enthusiasm our American system he lays himself open to the charge of helping to destroy standards, and the professional teacher dreads nothing so much as to be looked down upon by his brethren and characterized as easy in his marks. There is probably no one who is so proud as the young instructor

who "jacks up" a class or an institution by giving conditions and failures more freely than anyone has ventured to give them before. The present writer is not patriarchal enough to be entirely free from anxiety about his reputation for academic severity, but he begs leave to indulge in a few favorable comments on our American schools and the underlying principle which characterizes them as contrasted with the German and English systems.

The most obvious fact about our schools is that they try to accept all students and provide each student with something he can profitably do. This leads to all sorts of readjustments in individual cases. This student starts a course in Latin and finds, as he thinks, that it is not what he needs. That student takes a commercial course and through studying mathematics gets interested in engineering and finds that his commercial preparation does not fit him for admission to Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Teachers become exasperated at times because in their classes are mixed the earnest and the experimenters who are wandering about trying to find some subject which will really attract and hold their attention.

A second obvious fact in American education is that teachers are trying out every conceivable type of material which can be used for class instruction. The high schools in St. Louis and Cincinnati, for example, are so broadly inclusive that one sometimes wonders at their boldness. With forge-shops and laundries in the basement and swimming-tanks on the top floors, with rooms for dressmaking and mechanical drawing mixed with science laboratories and libraries, where are we to look for the end of this experimentation? Furthermore, even the most enthusiastic advocate of all these new subjects has to admit that the courses are not standardized. We are so busy introducing them that we have not settled a great many questions as to their relative values and as to the best ways of coupling them in the individual student's program with the older and more systematized courses.

Taking these two sets of facts as the text of our discussion, we may formulate a principle which will set our educational system into the most striking contrast with the systems in Germany and England. American schools aim to distribute students into those lines of study which best suit their individual capacities and best suit the possible further needs of society. Just so long as

there seems to be the remotest possibility of better adaptation to the future we go on with the experiment of training the individual. We do not know about the future and we do not care to apply to that remoter social order the standards of today. This seems expensive and at times it is almost expensive enough to justify anxiety lest it should drive us into intellectual bankruptcy. But we take courage from our study of biology, for have we not learned that all evolution is enormously expensive? If it prove true that our experiments ultimately produce greater flexibility of mind and action, we shall be justified. There are many of us who have seen the English and German schools and believe that American schools are producing more flexible, more adaptive minds.

Furthermore, in this matter of standards the case is not hopeless. Who shall set up a social standard? None other than the social group itself. Study the group and you have the best basis of future action. One humble illustration of this is to be found in our newer and wiser treatment of defective children. Formerly we used to try to make them learn to read and write as did their normal neighbors. Now we are growing wiser, we teach them to do the best they can. Perhaps the girl can learn to do domestic work. We train her to the top of her bent, using her time and energy better than if we tried to take her out of her class and make her read. So with the boy who can learn to be a carpenter efficient enough to earn a living. Reading is a desirable goal of education but it is an absurd standard for many a subnormal child.

The lesson we have learned in dealing with our subnormals is significant for normals too. The teacher who fails 40 per cent of his algebra class has mistaken the social group with which he has to deal. He ought to take a course in statistics. He would learn that a social standard can be fixed only by a consideration of the social group itself. Thus algebra is a well-organized subject in itself, but it may be a very bad instrument of education for certain social groups. In technical educational discussions this fact is expressed in the statement that school work must be organized with due regard to the needs of students rather than with exclusive regard to the logical character of the subject taught. Some ill-advised critics of American schools have thought that we are weakly considering the lazy students when we adopt this social standard. The fact

is, it is much more of a task to teach algebra so as to fit it to the needs of students than it is to teach algebra with the relentless purpose of eliminating those who do not get on with the course when it is organized with chief regard to the subject itself.

The recognition of social standards is our American contribution to education. Everywhere, in our university departments of education, in our normal schools, in the offices of our school superintendents and principals, in faculty meetings, and in the individual classrooms, vigorous scientific work is going on, discovering social standards of education and learning the art of applying them. To the observer who knows only the earlier type of standard it will often seem that we have no standards at all. One is bound to admit too that there are students and perhaps even teachers who have not learned the new lesson and indulge in the ease which seems to be offered by the withdrawal of the older rigor. With all such let us be patient. The slow process of selection will go on. The school will let the boy or girl through; he or she will have freedom and attention and go out into real life; be sure that ultimate natural selection will place him. If we had been wiser in the school, we might have aided society in placing the individual with less friction and loss, and some day the school will be a more intelligent distributing agency. But it is better for the race that we should work out this new idea than that we should be rigorous in the old way, the German way, or the English way.

One final comment suggests itself. In all its fundamental characteristics the American school expresses the spirit of American social life. From time to time some enthusiast for German schools tells us we ought to borrow the methods and standards of those schools. Especially are we flooded at this time with recommendations that we adopt the German system of industrial education. There is one general answer to all these invitations to imitate. We could not borrow their schools and their educational standards without taking on their attitude toward the more general social problems. The German school is the expression of a national spirit. Let him who is impatient with our schools look beneath the surface and see how our schools are in reality developing a new and broader social standard, unique in the world, and intelligible only to those who appreciate the truly democratic spirit.